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Hugh MacDiarmid and the meaning of independence: a post-election special

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Scotland is made out of cities and the country and the sea, which means it is so much more, as an imagined space, a geography of the mind, than its centres of population. Only people vote but Scotland is more than people, so when we vote, we should think of what we're representing, past, present and long-term future. Demographics are never enough. Readers of The National don't need reminding that as a political democracy within the United Kingdom Scotland will always be outvoted by the population of the south, some 50 million people. It's a tautology to say that democracy in Scotland can only take place within its own borders. But the danger is repeating the problem within those borders, when the higher population of the cities dominates the rest of the country. The answer is already in the question: independence should generate further devolution. And the way in which this might be imagined is right there in the work of Hugh MacDiarmid.

His first example is to talk about the question, in detail, seriously, patiently, to understand what Scotland might be. TV sound-snappery is counterproductive of thinking and its prevalence is a mechanism to generate cynicism and inanition. Whatever makes Scotland distinctive is, by definition, what makes it different from elsewhere. One thing that might connect with other countries, though, is the possibility of public intellectual life. Debate in Scottish life, sometimes the sheer quickness of it, has been much more evident since 2014, despite the blunders and malice of mass media representation. The silence of people, that awful disengagement from public life, is within my living memory. This has changed in Scotland. Over time, the appetite and aptitude of people to talk about the things that govern their lives has increased immeasurably. There are still those who will not engage in this conversation. Some would try to stop it altogether. But thankfully, it's much more normal now to talk about such matters than it used to be.

How did MacDiarmid see this prospect or imagine what might be made of it?

What might he have made of things today?

One possibly apocryphal story has it that when Winifred Ewing won the bye-election in Hamilton in 1967 for the SNP, MacDiarmid's comment was, "We shall win our independence – despite these people!"

In 1930, he was warning of the endless reiteration of the benefits of union with England in a poem entitled "The Parrot Cry":

Tell me the auld, auld story

O' hoo the Union brocht

Puir Scotland into being
As a country worth a thocht.
England, frae whom a' blessings flow
What could we dae withoot ye?
Then dinna threip it doon oor throats
As gin we e'er could doot ye!
My feelings lang wi' gratitude
Ha'e been sae sairly harrowed
That dod! I think it's time
The claith was owre the parrot!

In 1934, MacDiarmid wrote: "When was anything born in Scotland last? Risks taken and triumphs won?" And advised going to the roots of the matter, the "stony limits" he found in the Shetland archipelago:

I was better with the sounds of the sea
Than with the voices of men
And in desolate and desert places
I found myself again.
For the whole of the world came from these
And he who returns to the source
May gauge the worth of the outcome
And approve and perhaps reinforce
Or disapprove and perhaps change its course.

There is a direct line from MacDiarmid's willingness to take the risk to Kathleen Jamie, who made clear her position on Scotland's independence in an article entitled "The Disunited Kingdom" in *The New York Times* (23 February 2014): "We want independence because we seek good governance, and no longer think the Westminster government offers that, or social justice or decency. We find the prospect of being a small, independent nation on the fringe of Europe exciting, and look forward to making our own decisions, even if that means having to fix our own problems. We'll take the risk."

Yet MacDiarmid was well aware not only of the need to take risks sometimes, but also of the practicalities of day-to-day politics. After visiting Ireland in 1928, he wrote: "The objective has for

the most part been attained. What remains to be done is less inspiring than what has been accomplished.” Noting the recent “efflorescence of Irish genius”, he emphasises: “What are needed now are not poets and fiery propagandists and rebel leaders, but administrators, economists, and practical experts.” He spells it out: “There is an uneasy feeling in the minds of many intelligent Irishmen that autonomy is a delusion as long as there remains financial over-control by a junta of international financiers.” Some things only flourish in a culture of opposition but the Irish people are now “free to attempt to make their country prosperous and to overcome its economic difficulties.” Having talked to many people, he concludes, “I found none who wished to restore the Ascendancy”.

In 2014, an American friend of mine began looking into the question of Scottish independence by going back to where it ended: “I printed and read the 1707 Articles of Union. What astonishes me is the degree to which they are almost entirely a trade agreement. Your judiciary gets protected and the Church, but none of the political rhetoric of, say, the US Declaration of Independence or the Constitution that created a ‘United States’ seems much addressed. And it is certainly not like the Declaration of Arbroath. So, for example, in 1707 there were 350 Members of Parliament, and in 1689 it had already been made into a “constitutional monarchy” with power in Parliament. When the kingdoms joined, just 45 MPs and 16 Lords from Scotland were added. There was already no possible way Scotland could ever again have any real authority. So Scotland is in a permanent political trap.”

The 1707 agreement made Scotland into a de facto “region” despite the clear cultural, historic, linguistic, political contrasts as a de jure “kingdom” in a union. And the arguments about economic viability have been pervasive in all the public and broadcast political debates since 2014. Crucially, broadcasting is a matter reserved for Westminster. Again, nobody should need to be reminded that Scotland does not control its own broadcasting. But what does that mean? Scotland imports far more than it ever makes for itself. So how are the people of this country made aware of their country’s history, literature, languages and music?

The scholar and academic Dr John Robertson of the University of the West of Scotland conducted a long survey of BBC programmes on the subject of the Referendum and demonstrated conclusively that there was a clear bias against independence. Isn’t this even more evident now, since 2016?

Let’s speculate.

What would be the results of a survey of STV and BBC television and radio, itemising how many hours are given to the arts, generally, and we might limit that term to, let’s say, writing, painting and musical composition – as opposed or compared to sport, and let’s limit that to, let’s

say, football, rugby, and tennis. Take a month and see what results come in.

Then in more detail, how many hours on BBC and STV are given to writers, artists, composers, and again, let's say specifically seven acknowledged greats from each area: Burns, Hogg, Scott, Stevenson, MacDiarmid, Grassie Gibbon, MacLean; Raeburn, Wilkie, McTaggart, Fergusson, Armour, Eardley, Bellany; Carver, Mackenzie, MacCunn, McEwen, Stevenson, Musgrave, MacMillan.

How many hours are given to any of these people on Scotland's TV and radio, broadcast into all homes regardless of specialist subscriptions and personal preferences?

Or consider the history of Scotland in all aspects, or the multiform geography of Scotland, land ownership and use, ecology, energy production. Or religion in Scotland: when has the history and geographical provenance of Scotland's religious identity ever been explored in public media? The questions multiply and are even now only beginning to be asked seriously.

Until recently, no school in Scotland was obliged in any way to teach Scottish history or Scottish literature. No wonder MacDiarmid felt lonely.

The novelist James Robertson said in August 2014, "we wouldn't have a referendum, we wouldn't even have a parliament, an SNP, if Scotland were not already a nation with a strong sense of itself and its identity. A lot of that does and must derive from culture and cultural differences, and there are good reasons why the debate has not been allowed or enabled to get into those areas of identity, but it seems to be that culture underpins a lot of what this is about."

After MacDiarmid, the next generation of Scotland's poets responded to and extended MacDiarmid's vision. The comprehensive, changing idea of the process of becoming that Scotland has always been engaged in was MacDiarmid's provenance; a loyalty to local attachment was evident in the poets who were writing through and after the Second World War: Sorley Maclean, Norman MacCaig, Edwin Morgan, Iain Crichton Smith, George Mackay Brown, Robert Garioch; and self-confidence grew and was evident among the women writing since the 1970s, especially Liz Lochhead, Kathleen Jamie, Meg Bateman, Sheena Blackhall, Jackie Kay. In every poet's work, local attachment and personal voice were in changing alliance with international forms of address, the widest possible readership. But between these two identities, the national provenance was crucial, still to be constructed in political statehood, still to be riskily fought for, a triumph still to be won.

The whole story so far, say from 1922, when MacDiarmid's name first appeared in print, to 2017, might be charted from what he set out to do. His propositions of the value and meaning of cultural life and social practice have been provocations ever since he uttered them. He insisted we consider the worst as well as the best, for our own good, to get to know what you wish for.

His practice was to take any situation – wherever you are – and drive it to the furthest extremes of possibility, where it starts to break down – and then to break it down. It breaks down and you fall through to deeper ground, more secure ground, the foundation ground at a deeper level. And then his practice is to take *that* situation to where *it* starts to break down. That was his methodology. That was his habitual, characteristic practice.

Now, anywhere along that route you can drop in and say – he was a fascist, he was a communist, he was advocating the Scots language, he was advocating the Gaelic language – all of these things and more might be said, but none of them are conclusively or categorically priorities. His job, as he understood it, was to imagine all these things, to write them, in works of art, and thereby allow others to imagine them. Or, not so much “allow others” as provoke them. That is to say, he was a writer, absolutely and intrinsically opposed by the practice of his art to the failure that is physical conflict or bloodshed. That was what he did.

There's mair in birds than men ha'e faddomed yet.

Tho' maist churn oot the stock sangs o' their kind

There's aiblins genius here and there; and aince

'Mang whitebeams, hollies, siller birks –

The tree o' licht –

I mind

I used to hear a blackie mony a nicht

Singin' awa' t'an unconscionable 'oor

Wi' nocht but the water keepin't company

(Or nocht that ony human ear could hear.)

– And wondered if the blackie heard it either

Or cared whether it was singin' tae or no'!

O there's nae sayin' what my verses awn

To memories like these. Ha'e I come back

To find oot? Or to borrow mair? Or see

Their helpless puirness to what gar'd them be?

Late sang the blackie but it stopt at last.

The river still ga'ed singin' past.

He knew what extremism meant, worded it, imagined violence, but actually, in writing, insists that we consider things the climate does not favour thinking on. In this he is as close, and as accurate, as

Shakespeare. When we see the actors play King Lear, and hear Lear's son-in-law Cornwall, husband to Regan, utter the words as he blinds poor Gloucester: "Out, vile jelly" – it's almost impossible to watch, but because it is a play, it is possible. We see and can think about what happens when human potential is at its worst. In Edwin Morgan's phrase, "Hugh MacDiarmid has shown what can be achieved when all the risks are taken." MacDiarmid's poetry performs or enacts all the possibilities, with a thankfully comprehensive lack of inhibition. It demands that you think things through, seriously. It demands more than most readers in Scotland have given him, yet. It demands that we should think again, even – or, especially – in the wake of yesterday's election.

When political leaders fail, these things are worth remembering. MacDiarmid's political heroes were Lenin and Stalin. They failed. They did not bring liberation.

MacDiarmid did. The arts do. And will. Early days yet.